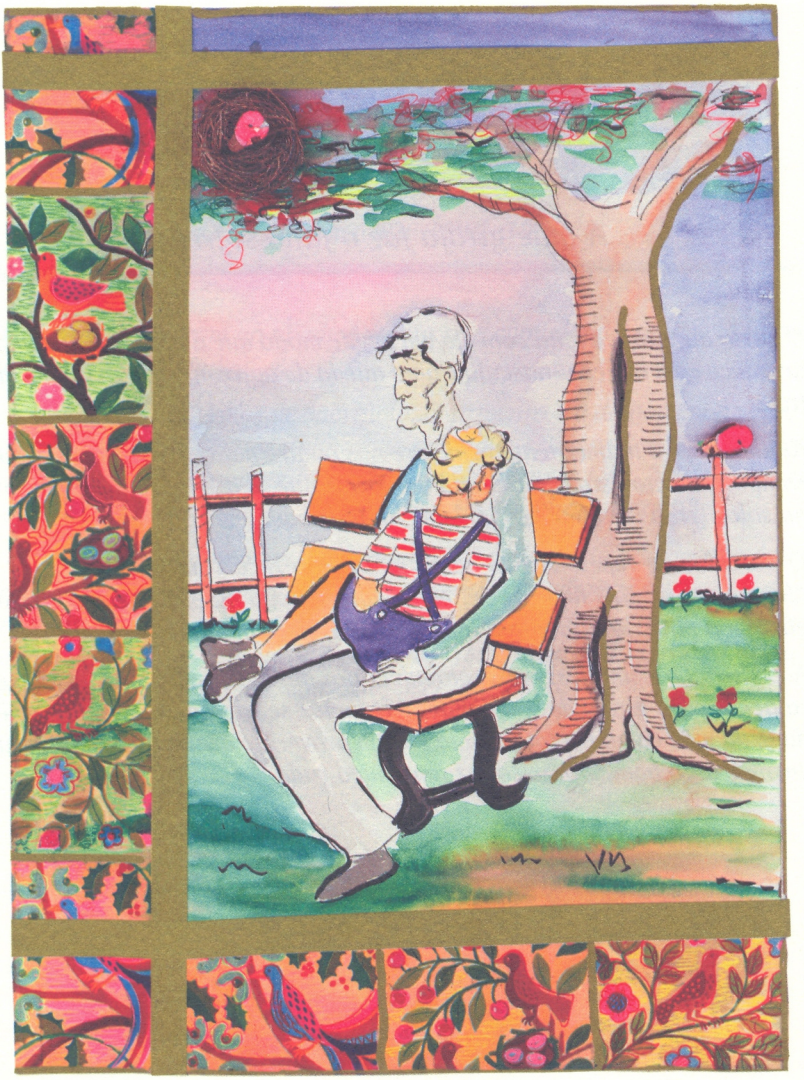
Paulo Coelho



Stories for Parents, Children and Grandchildren

Volume 1

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Paulo Coelho

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2008

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True skill

The yogi Raman was a true master of the art of archery. One morning, he invited his favorite disciple to watch a display of his skill. The disciple had seen this more than a hundred times before, but he nevertheless obeyed his teacher.

They went into the wood beside the monastery and when they reached a magnificent oak tree, Raman took a flower which he had tucked in his collar and placed it on one of the branches.

He then opened his bag and took out three objects: his splendid bow made of precious wood, an arrow and a white handkerchief embroidered with lilacs.

The yogi positioned himself one hundred paces from the spot where he had placed the flower. Facing his target, he asked his disciple to

blindfold him with the embroidered handkerchief.

The disciple did as his teacher requested.

'How often have you seen me practice the noble and ancient sport of archery?' Raman asked him.

'Every day,' replied his disciple. 'And you have always managed to hit the rose from three hundred paces away.'

With his eyes covered by the handkerchief, the yogi Raman placed his feet firmly on the ground, drew back the bowstring with all his might - aiming at the rose placed on one of the branches of the oak tree - and then released the arrow.

The arrow whistled through the air, but it did not even hit the tree, missing the target by an embarrassingly wide margin.

'Did I hit it?' said Raman, removing the handkerchief from his eyes.

'No, you missed completely,' replied the disciple. 'I thought you were going to

demonstrate to me the power of thought and your ability to perform magic.'

'I have just taught you the most important lesson about the power of thought,' replied Raman. 'When you want something, concentrate only on that: *no one will ever hit a target they cannot see*.'

How to be remembered

In the monastery of Sceta, Abbot Lucas gathered the brothers together for a sermon.

'May you all be forgotten,' he said.

'But why?' one of the brothers asked. 'Does that mean that our example can never serve to help someone in need?'

'In the days when everyone was just, no one paid any attention to people who behaved in an exemplary manner,' replied the abbot. 'Everyone did their best, never thinking that by behaving thus they were doing their duty by their brother. They loved their neighbour because they understood that this was part of life and they were merely obeying a law of nature. They shared their possessions in order not to accumulate more than they could carry, for journeys lasted a whole lifetime. They lived together in freedom, giving and receiving,

making no demands on others and blaming no one. That is why their deeds were never spoken of and that is why they left no stories. If only we could achieve the same thing now: to make goodness such an ordinary thing that there would be no need to praise those who practice it.

Rebuilding the world

A father was trying to read the newspaper, but his little son kept pestering him. Finally, the father grew tired of this and, tearing a page from the newspaper - one that bore a map of the world - he cut it into several pieces and handed them to his son.

'Right, now you've got something to do. I've given you a map of the world and I want to see if you can put it back together correctly.'

He resumed his reading, knowing that the task would keep the child occupied for the rest of the day. However, a quarter of an hour later, the boy returned with the map.

'Has your mother been teaching you geography?' asked his father in astonishment.

'I don't even know what that is,' replied the boy. 'But there was a photo of a man on the other side of the page, so I put the man back

together and found I'd put the world back together too.'

Thinking about death

Zilu said to Confucius (a Chinese philosopher, who lived in the sixth century B.C.):

'May I ask what you think about death?'

'You may ask,' replied Confucius, 'but if you still don't understand life, why do you want to know about death. Leave thinking about death for when life is over.'

Paying the right price

Nixivan had invited his friends to supper and was cooking a succulent piece of meat for them. Suddenly, he realised that he had run out of salt.

So Nixivan called to his son.

'Go to the village and buy some salt, but pay a fair price for it: neither too much nor too little.'

His son was surprised.

'I can understand why I shouldn't pay too much for it, Father, but if I can bargain them down, why not save a bit of money?'

'That would be the sensible thing to do in a big city, but it could destroy a small village like ours.'

When Nixivan's guests, who had overheard their conversation, wanted to know why they

should not buy salt more cheaply if they could, Nixivan replied:

'The only reason a man would sell salt more cheaply than usual would be because he was desperate for money. And anyone who took advantage of that situation would be showing a lack of respect for the sweat and struggle of the man who laboured to produce it.'

'But such a small thing couldn't possibly destroy a village.'

'In the beginning, there was only a small amount of injustice abroad in the world, but everyone who came afterwards added their portion, always thinking that it was only very small and unimportant, and look where we have ended up today.'

The missing brick

Once, when I and my wife were travelling, I received a fax from my secretary.

'There's one glass brick missing for the work on the kitchen renovation,' she said. 'I'm sending you the original plan as well as the plan the builder has come up with to compensate for it.'

On the one hand was the design my wife had made: harmonious lines of bricks with an opening for ventilation. On the other hand was the plan drawn up to resolve the problem of the missing brick: a real jigsaw puzzle in which the glass squares were arranged in a higgledy-piggledy fashion that defied aesthetics.

'Just buy another brick,' wrote my wife. And so they did and thus stuck to the original design.

That afternoon, I thought for a long time about what had happened; how often, for the lack of one brick, we completely distort the original plan of our lives.

Epictetus reflects on meetings

Epictetus (55 A.D.-135 A.D.) was born a slave and became one of the great philosophers of Rome. He was expelled from the city in 94 A.D. and it was while in exile that he came up with a way of teaching his followers. Here is an extract from his Art of Living.

'Two things may happen when we meet someone: either we become friends or we try to convince that person to accept our beliefs. The same thing happens when a hot coal meets another piece of coal: it either shares its fire with it or is overwhelmed by the other's size and is extinguished.

But, since, generally speaking, we feel insecure when we first meet someone, we are more likely to affect indifference, arrogance or

excessive humility. The result is that we cease being who we are, and matters move into a strange world that does not belong to us.

In order to avoid this happening, make your good feelings immediately apparent. Arrogance may only be a banal mask for cowardice, but it prevents important things from flourishing in your life.'

A story by Kahlil Gibran

I was strolling in the gardens of an insane asylum when I met a young man who was reading a philosophy book.

His behavior and his evident good health made him stand out from the other inmates.

I sat down beside him and asked:

'What are you doing here?'

He looked at me, surprised. But seeing that I was not one of the doctors, he replied:

'It's very simple. My father, a brilliant lawyer, wanted me to be like him. My uncle, who owns a large emporium, hoped I would follow his example. My mother wanted me to be the image of her beloved father. My sister always set her husband before me as an example of the successful man. My brother tried to train me up to be a fine athlete like himself.

And the same thing happened at school, with the piano teacher and the English teacher - they were all convinced and determined that they were the best possible example to follow. None of them looked at me as one should look at a man, but as if they were looking in a mirror.

So I decided to enter this asylum. At least here I can be myself.'

Meeting the king

A Persian king asked Saadi of Shiraz:

'On your wanderings through the cities of my kingdom, do you think of me and of my works?'

'Your Majesty, I think of you whenever I forget to think of God,' was the wise man's answer.

The one guilty man

Wise King Weng asked to visit the palace prison. And he began listening to the prisoners' complaints.

'I'm innocent,' said a man accused of murder. 'I'm here simply because I wanted to give my wife a fright, but I accidentally killed her.'

'I was accused of taking a bribe,' said another, 'but all I did was accept a gift.'

All the prisoners declared their innocence to King Weng, until one of them, a young man of only twenty or so, said:

'I'm guilty. I wounded my brother in a fight and I deserve to be punished. This place has made me reflect on the pain I caused.'

'Remove this criminal from the prison immediately!' cried King Weng. 'He'll end up corrupting all these entirely innocent men.'

How to help the country

Zizhang searched for Confucius throughout China. The country was going through a time of great social upheaval, and he feared there could be bloodshed.

He found the master sitting beneath a fig tree, meditating.

'Master, we urgently need your presence in the government,' said Zizhang. 'We are on the brink of chaos.'

Confucius continued to meditate.

'Master, you taught us that we must not stand idly by,' Zizhang went on. 'You said that we were responsible for the world.'

'I am praying for the country,' replied Confucius. 'Later, I will go and help the man who lives round the corner. By doing what is within our reach, we benefit everyone. By merely coming up with ideas about how to save

the world, we do not even help ourselves. There are a thousand ways of getting involved in politics; there is no need for me to be part of the government.'

Where the monkey puts his hand

I said to a friend:

'It's odd that proverb, "An old monkey never puts his hand in the pot".'

'Yes, but it has its own logic,' he replied. 'In India, hunters make a small hole in a coconut, put a banana inside and bury the whole thing. A monkey finds the coconut, puts his hand in the hole to grab the banana, but then can't get it out because his closed hand is too big for the hole. Instead of letting go of the banana, the monkey stays there wrestling with the impossible and gets caught.'

The same thing happens in our own lives. The need to have a particular thing - often something small and useless - ends up making us prisoners of that need.

Choosing one's fate

Many years ago, there lived a man who was capable of loving and forgiving everyone he came across. Because of this, God sent an angel to talk to him.

'God asked me to come and visit you and tell you that he wishes to reward you for your goodness,' said the angel. 'You may have any gift you wish for. Would you like the gift of healing?'

'Certainly not,' said the man. 'I would prefer God to choose those who should be healed.'

'And what about leading sinners back to the path of Truth?'

'That's a job for angels like you. I don't want to be venerated by anyone or to serve as a permanent example.'

'Look, I can't go back to Heaven without having given you a miracle. If you don't choose, I'll have to choose one for you.'

The man thought for a moment and then said:

'All right, I would like good to be done through me, but without anyone noticing, not even me, in case I should commit the sin of vanity.'

So the angel arranged for the man's shadow to have the power of healing, but only when the sun was shining on the man's face. In this way, wherever he went, the sick were healed, the earth grew fertile again, and sad people rediscovered happiness.

The man travelled the Earth for many years, oblivious of the miracles he was working because when he was facing the sun, his shadow was always behind him. In this way, he was able to live and die unaware of his own holiness.

A search frustrated

The mystic Ramakrishna began his dedication to the spiritual life when he was sixteen. At first, he used to weep bitterly because, despite his devotion to the work at the temple, he seemed to be getting nowhere.

Later, when he was famous, a friend asked him about that period of his life. Ramakrishna replied:

'If a thief were to spend the night in a room with only a thin wall separating him from another room full of gold, do you think he would be able to sleep? He would lie awake all night, scheming. When I was young, I desired God as ardently as a thief would desire that gold, and it took me a long time to learn that the greatest virtue in the spiritual search is patience.'

Krishna will hear your prayer

A widow from a poor village in Bengal did not have enough money to pay for her son's bus fare, and so when the boy started going to school, he would have to walk through the forest all on his own. In order to reassure him, she said:

'Don't be afraid of the forest, my son. Ask your God Krishna to go with you. He will hear your prayer.'

The boy followed his mother's suggestion, and Krishna duly appeared and from then on accompanied him to school every day.

When it was his teacher's birthday, the boy asked his mother for some money in order to buy him a present.

'We haven't any money, son. Ask your brother Krishna to get you a present.'

The following day, the boy explained his problem to Krishna, who gave him a jug of milk.

The boy proudly handed the milk to the teacher, but the other boys' presents were far superior and the teacher didn't even notice his.

'Take that jug of milk to the kitchen,' said the teacher to an assistant.

The assistant did as he was told. However, when he tried to empty the jug, he found that it immediately filled up again of its own accord. He immediately informed the teacher, who was amazed and asked the boy:

'Where did you get that jug and how does it manage to stay full all the time?'

'Krishna, the God of the forest, gave it to me.'

The teacher, the students and the assistant all burst out laughing.

'There are no gods in the forest, that's pure superstition,' said the teacher. 'If he exists, let's all go and see him.'

The whole group set off. The boy started calling for Krishna, but he did not appear. The boy made one last desperate appeal.

'Brother Krishna, my teacher wants to see you. Please show yourself!'

At that moment, a voice emerged from the forest and echoed through the city and was heard by everyone.

'How can he possibly want to see me, my son? He doesn't even believe I exist!'

The art of listening

The wise man, Saadi of Shiraz, was walking along a road with his disciple when he saw a man trying to get his mule to move. When the animal refused to budge, the man began calling him the worst names he could think of.

'Don't be silly,' said Saadi. 'The mule will never learn your language. You would do better to calm down and learn his language.'

And as he walked away, he remarked to his disciple:

'Before you get into an argument with a mule, remember the scene you have just witnessed.'

The bugle that drove away tigers

A man arrived in a village carrying a mysterious bugle decorated with red and yellow rags, glass beads and animal bones.

'This bugle can drive away tigers,' said the man. 'From this day forth, for a modest daily fee, I will play the bugle every morning and you will never be eaten by those terrible animals.'

Terrified by the threat of attack by a wild animal, the inhabitants of the village agreed to pay what the newcomer asked.

Many years passed, the owner of the bugle grew rich and built himself a magnificent castle. One morning, a boy who was passing through the village, asked who the owner of the castle was. When he heard the story, he decided to go and talk to the man.

'I was told that you have a bugle that can drive away tigers,' said the boy. 'But there are no tigers in this country.'

The man immediately called together all the villagers and asked the boy to repeat what he had said.

'Did you hear that?' cried the man as soon as the boy had finished speaking. 'There you have irrefutable proof of the power of my bugle!'

The silence of the night

A Sufi master and his disciple were walking across a desert in Africa. When night fell, they pitched their tent and lay down to rest.

'How silent it is!' said the disciple.

'Never say "how silent it is",' replied the teacher. 'Say rather: "I cannot hear nature".

Matisse and Renoir meet

As a young man, the painter Henri Matisse used to pay a weekly visit to the great Renoir in his studio. When Renoir was afflicted by arthritis, Matisse began to visit him daily, taking him food, brushes, paints, but always trying to persuade the master that he was working too hard and needed to rest a little.

One day, noticing that each brushstroke made Renoir cry out with pain, Matisse could contain himself no longer:

'Master, you have already created a vast and important body of work, why continue torturing yourself in this way?'

'Very simple,' Renoir replied. 'Beauty remains, but pain passes.'

The piece of bread that fell wrong side up

We all have a tendency to believe that everything we do will turn out wrong, because we think we do not deserve to be blessed. Here is an interesting story about precisely that feeling.

A man was quietly eating his breakfast. Suddenly, the piece of bread which he had just spread with butter fell to the ground.

Imagine his surprise when he looked down and saw that it had landed buttered side up! The man thought he had witnessed a miracle. Excited, he went to tell his friends what had happened, and they were all amazed because when a piece of bread falls on the floor, it always lands buttered side down, making a mess of everything.

'Perhaps you're a saint,' one friend said. 'And this is a sign from God.'

Soon the whole village knew, and they all started animatedly discussing the incident: how was it that, against all expectations, that man's slice of bread had fallen on the floor buttered side up? Since no one could come up with a credible answer, they went to see a Teacher who lived nearby and told him the story.

The Teacher demanded one night to pray, reflect and ask for Divine inspiration. The following day, they all returned, eager for an answer.

'It's quite simple really,' said the Teacher. 'The fact is that the piece of bread fell exactly as it should have fallen, but the butter had been spread on the wrong side.'

The slayer of dragons

Zhuangzi, the famous Chinese writer, tells the story of Zhu Pingman, who went in search of a teacher in order to learn the best way to slay dragons.

The teacher trained Pingman for ten whole years, until he had honed to perfection the most sophisticated dragon-slaying techniques.

Pingman spent the rest of his life looking for dragons in order show off his skills: to his great disappointment, he never found a single dragon.

The writer of the story comments: 'We all prepare ourselves to slay dragons, but end up instead being devoured by the ants of the details that we never bothered to look at.'

About masters and teachers

In one of his Family Conversations, Confucius sets down an interesting dialogue on the subject of learning.

Confucius sat down to rest, and his students immediately started asking him questions. On that day, he was in a good mood and so decided to answer. Someone asked him:

'You are capable of explaining everything you feel. Why don't you go to the Emperor and talk to him?'

'The Emperor himself makes beautiful speeches,' said Confucius, 'but beautiful speeches are merely a question of technique, they do not of themselves contain Virtue.'

'Well, send him your book of poems, then.'

'Those three hundred poems could be summed up in two words: think correctly. That is the secret.'

'What does thinking correctly involve?'

'It's knowing how to use mind and heart, discipline and emotion. When we want something, life will guide us there, but by unexpected paths. We often feel confused because we are surprised by those paths and think we must be going in the wrong direction. That is why I said, allow yourself to be carried away by emotion, but have enough discipline to follow it through.'

'Is that what you do?'

'When I was fifteen, I began to learn. When I was thirty, I knew what I wanted. When I was forty, my doubts resurfaced. When I was fifty, I discovered that Heaven has a plan for me and for each man on the face of the Earth. When I was sixty, I understood that plan and found the serenity to follow it. Now that I'm seventy, I can listen to my heart, but without letting it distract me from the path.'

'So what makes you different from other men who have also accepted the will of Heaven?'

'I try to share it with you. And anyone wanting to discuss an ancient truth with a new generation has to use his capacity to teach. That is my one quality, being a good teacher.'

'And what is a good teacher?'

'Someone who questions everything he teaches. Old ideas cannot enslave a man, because they change and take on new forms. So let us use the philosophical riches of the past, but without forgetting the challenges that the present world sets before us.'

'And what is a good student?'

'Someone who listens to what I say, but adapts my teachings to his life and never follows them blindly. Someone who looks not just for employment, but for a job that brings him dignity. Someone who does not seek to be noticed, but to do something notable.'

The bridge and the plank

After many years of work and meditation on the best way to cross the river that ran past his house, a man created a kind of footbridge out of planks. The villagers, however, rarely used it because it seemed so precarious.

One day, an engineer appeared. With the help of the inhabitants, he built a proper bridge, which infuriated the maker of the footbridge. He would tell anyone who would listen that the engineer had failed to show due respect for his work.

'The footbridge is still there!' replied the other villagers. 'It's a monument to your years of effort and thought.'

'Yes, but no one uses it,' the man would reply tetchily.

'You are a highly respected citizen and we all like you, it's just that we find the new bridge more beautiful and more useful than your plank footbridge.'

'But it's crossing my river.'

'Now, however much we may respect your work, we have to say that the river is not yours. We could wade, swim or row across it, but if people prefer to use the bridge, why not respect their wishes? Besides, how can we trust someone who, instead of trying to improve his own bridge, spends all his time criticising someone else's?'

(Based on a story by Silvio Paulo Albino)

On my way to a book fair

I was flying from New York to Chicago to attend the book fair held by the American Booksellers Association. Suddenly, a young man stood up in the aisle of the plane and announced:

'I need twelve volunteers each willing to carry a single rose when we get off the plane.'

Several people raised their hands. I did too, but I wasn't chosen.

Even so, I decided to follow the group. We landed and the young man indicated a young woman in the arrivals hall at O'Hare airport. One by one, the passengers presented their roses to her. At last, in front of everyone, the young man asked her to marry him, and she accepted.

An air steward said to me:

'I've been working here for years, and that's the most romantic thing that has ever happened in this airport.'

The essence of forgiveness

One of Napoleon's soldiers committed a crime - the story does not explain what exactly - and he was condemned to death.

On the evening before he was due to be shot, the soldier's mother came to plead for her son's life to be spared.

'Madam, your son's action does not deserve clemency.'

'I know,' said the mother. 'If it did, that would not be true forgiveness. To forgive is the ability to go beyond vengeance or justice.'

When he heard those words, Napoleon commuted the death sentence to exile.

The middle path

The monk Lucas, accompanied by a disciple, was walking through a village. An old man asked the monk:

'Holy man, how do I become closer to God?'

'Enjoy yourself more, and praise the Creator with your joy,' came the reply.

The two men were about to walk on when a young man approached them. He asked:

'What should I do in order to become closer to God?'

'Spend less time merely enjoying yourself,' said Lucas.

When the young man left, the disciple remarked:

'You don't seem very sure whether we should enjoy ourselves or not.'

'The spiritual search is a bridge with no handrail built across an abyss,' replied Lucas. 'If someone is walking very close to the right side, I say: "To the left!" If they go too close to the left side, I say: "To the right!" It is the extremes that divert us from the Path.'

Pleasure and the tongue

A Zen master was resting with one of his disciples. At one point, he took a melon out of his bag and cut it in two so that both could eat it.

While they were eating, the disciple said:

'Wise master, since everything you do has a meaning, perhaps your sharing this melon with me is a sign that you have something to teach me.'

The master continued eating in silence.

'Your silence obviously conceals a question,' the disciple insisted, 'and it must be this: does the pleasure I am experiencing in eating this delicious fruit reside in the melon or in my tongue?'

The master said nothing. The disciple went on excitedly:

'And since everything in life has meaning, I think I am close to finding the answer to that question: the pleasure is an act of love and interdependence between us, because without the melon there would be no object of pleasure and without my tongue…'

'That's enough!' said the master. 'The real fools are those who think themselves terribly intelligent and spend all their time trying to interpret everything. The melon is delicious, and that's enough, now let me eat in peace!'

El Greco and light

One pleasant spring afternoon, a friend went to visit the painter El Greco. To his surprise, he found him in his studio with all the curtains closed.

El Greco was working on a painting which had as its central theme the Virgin Mary, and he was using only a single candle to light the room. His bemused friend commented:

'I had always been told that painters need sunlight in order to select the right colours. Why don't you draw the curtains?'

'Not now,' said El Greco. 'That would disturb the brilliant fire of inspiration inflaming my soul and filling everything around me with light.'

How to level out the world

Once when Confucius was travelling with his disciples, he heard tell of a very intelligent boy living in a particular village. Confucius went to see and talk to him and he jokingly asked:

'How would you like to help me do away with all the irregularities and inequalities in the world?'

'But why?' asked the boy. 'If we flattened the mountains, the birds would have no shelter. If we filled up the deep rivers and the sea, the fish would die. If the head of the village had as much authority as the madman, no one would know where they were. The world is vast enough to cope with differences.'

The disciples left feeling greatly impressed by the boy's wisdom, and as they journeyed

towards the next town, one of them commented that all children should be like that. Confucius said:

'I've known many children who, instead of playing and doing the things appropriate to their age, were busy trying to understand the world. Not one of those precocious children did anything of any great significance later in life because they had never experienced the innocence and healthy irresponsibility of childhood.'

The importance of knowing names

Zilu asked Confucius:

'If King Wen were to ask you to govern the country, what would your first action be?'

'I would learn the names of my advisers.'

'What nonsense! That is hardly a matter of great concern to a prime minister.'

'A man cannot hope to receive help from what he does not know,' replied Confucius. 'If he does not understand Nature, he will not understand God. In just the same way, if he does not know who is at his side, he will have no friends. Without friends, he will be unable to draw up a plan. Without a plan, he cannot direct anyone's actions. Without direction, the country will plunge into darkness, and even dancers will not know which foot to put down next. So an

apparently banal action - learning the name of the person at your side - can make an enormous difference. The besetting sin of our time is that everyone wants to put things right immediately, and they forget that in order to do so you need a lot of people.'

The city and the army

According to legend, when Joan of Arc was marching towards Poitiers with her army, she came across a boy playing in the middle of the road with some earth and twigs.

'What are you doing?' asked Joan of Arc.

'Can't you see?' replied the boy. 'This is a city.'

'Excellent,' she said, 'now if you will please leave the road, my men and I need to get past.'

The boy got angrily to his feet and stood before her.

'A city does not move. An army might destroy it, but the city itself stays where it is.'

Smiling at the boy's determination, Joan of Arc ordered her army to leave the road and go around the 'city'.

Not an example

The Rabbi Elimelekh had delivered a wonderful sermon and now he was returning to his native land. To honour him and to show their gratitude, the faithful decided to follow Elimelekh's carriage out of the city.

At one point, the Rabbi stopped the carriage and asked the driver to go ahead without him while he joined the people.

'A fine example of humility,' said one of the men beside him.

'Humility has nothing to do with it, just a little intelligence,' replied Elimelekh. 'You're all out here having a walk, singing, drinking wine, chatting with each other, making new friends, and all because of an old Rabbi who came to talk to you about the art of living. So let's leave my theories in the carriage, I want to enjoy the party.'

Praying for everyone

A farm labourer with a sick wife, asked a Buddhist monk to say a series of prayers. The priest began to pray, asking God to cure all those who were ill.

'Just a moment,' said the farm labourer. 'I asked you to pray for my wife and there you are praying for everyone who's ill.'

'I'm praying for her too.'

'Yes, but you're praying for everyone. You might end up helping my neighbour, who's also ill, and I don't even like him.'

'You understand nothing about healing,' said the monk, moving off. 'By praying for everyone, I am adding my prayers to those of the millions of people who are also praying for their sick. Added together, those voices reach God and benefit everyone. Separately, they lose their strength and go nowhere.'

Saadi of Shiraz and prayer

Saadi of Shiraz used to tell the following story:

'When I was a child, I used to pray with my father, my uncles and my cousins. Every night we would gather together to listen to a passage from the Koran.

On one such night, while my uncle was reading a passage out loud, I noticed that most of the people were asleep. I said to my father: "Not one of these dozy people is listening to the words of the Prophet. They'll never reach God."

And my father replied: "My dear son, look for your own path with faith and let others take care of themselves. Who knows, perhaps they are talking to God in their dreams. Believe me, I

would much prefer you to be sleeping alongside them than to hear your harsh words of judgement and condemnation.'"

The sorrowing father

Rabbi Abraham had lived an exemplary life. When he died, he went straight to Paradise, and the angels welcomed him with songs of praise.

Yet Abraham sat alone, head in hands, deeply distressed, refusing all consolation. Finally, he was brought before the Almighty and he heard an infinitely tender voice ask him:

'My beloved servant, what sorrow do you bear in your breast?'

'I am unworthy of the honours being heaped upon me,' replied the Rabbi. 'I was considered an example to my people, but I must have done something very wrong. My one son, on whom I lavished my finest teaching, became a Christian!'

'Oh, don't worry about that,' said the voice of the Almighty. 'I had an only son too and he did exactly the same thing!'

The sorrowing mother

Roberto Shiniashiky tells of a Jewish mother who tried to bring her son up in the most traditional way possible. The boy, however, had a forceful personality and would only do what his heart told him to do.

The mother, just like Rabbi Abraham in the preceding story, went straight to Paradise when she died, for she had been a shining example of devotion here on Earth. When she got there, she told the other mothers about the agonies her son had put her through, and she learned that not one of them was satisfied with the paths their children had followed.

After days of conversation, during which they voiced their regrets that they had not been strong enough to control their children, the group of women saw Our Lady passing by.

'Now she managed to bring her son up properly,' said one of the mothers.

And they all crowded round Our Lady, praising her son Jesus's career.

'He was a wise man,' they said. 'He accomplished all that he was destined to accomplish, he walked the path of truth, never deviating for one moment, and he is still a source of pride to his family.'

'Yes, you're quite right,' said Our Lady, 'but to be perfectly honest, I wanted him to be a doctor.'

Where God lives

When the great Rabbi Yitzhak Meir was studying the traditions of his people, one of his friends said to him jokingly:

'I'll give you a florin if you can tell me where God lives.'

'I'll give you two florins if you can tell me where he doesn't live,' replied Meir.

The moment of dawn

A Rabbi gathered together his students and asked them:

'How do we know the exact moment when night ends and day begins?'

'It's when, standing some way away, you can tell a sheep from a dog,' said one boy.

The Rabbi was not content with the answer. Another student said:

'No, it's when, standing some way away, you can tell an olive tree from a fig tree.'

'No, that's not a good definition either.'

'Well, what's the right answer?' asked the boys.

And the Rabbi said:

'When a stranger approaches, and we think he is our brother, that is the moment when night ends and day begins.'

It's raining up ahead

Struggling against certain things which will pass in time anyway is a waste of energy. This very brief Chinese story illustrates this very well.

In the middle of the countryside, it began to rain. Everyone scurried off to seek shelter, except for one man, who continued to walk slowly along.

'Why aren't you running for shelter?' someone asked.

'Because it's raining up ahead too,' came the answer.

Nasrudin always makes the wrong choice

Every day Nasrudin went to beg for alms in the market, and people used to make fun of him by playing the following trick: they would show him two coins, one worth ten times more than the other, and Nasrudin would always choose the smaller coin.

The story went round the whole province. Day after day, groups of men and women would show him the two coins, and Nasrudin would always choose the smaller one.

Then one day, a generous man, tired of seeing Nasrudin ridiculed in this fashion, beckoned him over to a corner of the square and said:

'When they offer you two coins, you should choose the larger one. That way you would earn

more money and people wouldn't consider you an idiot.'

'That sounds like good advice,' replied Nasrudin, 'but if I chose the larger coin, people would stop offering me money, because they like to believe that I am even more stupid than they are. You've no idea how much money I've earned using this trick. There's nothing wrong with looking like a fool if, in fact, you're being really clever.'

The one who cared most

The writer Leo Buscaglia was once invited to be on the jury of a school competition to find 'the child who cared most for others'.

The winner was a boy whose neighbour, a gentleman of over eighty, had just been widowed. When he saw the old man sitting in his garden crying, the boy jumped over the fence, sat on the man's lap and stayed there for a long time.

When he went back home, his mother asked him what he had said to the poor man.

'Nothing,' said the boy. 'He's lost his wife and that must have really hurt. I just went over to help him to cry.'

The answer

Once a man asked Rabbi Joshua ben Karechah:

'Why did God choose to speak to Moses out of a thorn bush?'

The Rabbi replied:

'If he had chosen an olive tree or a bramble bush, you would have asked the same question. But I cannot leave you without an answer, so I will say that God chose a wretched little thorn bush in order to teach us that there is nowhere on Earth where He is not present.'

The window and the mirror

A very rich young man went to see a Rabbi in order to ask his advice about what he should do with his life. The Rabbi led him over to the window and asked him:

'What can you see through the glass?'

'I can see men coming and going and a blind man begging for alms in the street.'

Then the Rabbi showed him a large mirror and said to him:

'Look in this mirror and tell me what you see.'

'I can see myself.'

'And you can't see the others. Notice that the window and the mirror are both made of the same basic material, glass; but in the mirror, because the glass is coated with a fine layer of

silver, all you can see is yourself. You should compare yourself to these two kinds of glass. Poor, you saw other people and felt compassion for them. Rich - covered in silver - you see yourself. You will only be worth anything when you have the courage to tear away the coating of silver covering your eyes in order to be able to see again and love your fellow man.'

A man lying on the ground

On 1 July, at five past one in the afternoon, there was a man of about fifty lying on the sea front in Copacabana. I glanced down at him as I walked by, then continued on to the stall where I usually go for a drink of coconut water.

As a resident of Rio de Janeiro, I must have passed by such men, women or children hundreds or even thousands of times. As someone who has travelled widely, I have seen the same scene in almost every country I have visited, from wealthy Sweden to impoverished Romania. I have seen people lying on the ground in all weathers: in the icy winters of Madrid or Paris or New York, where they stay close to the hot air vents outside the subway stations; in the scalding Libyan sun, amongst the

rubble of buildings destroyed by years of war. People lying on the ground - drunk, homeless, tired - are not a new sight to anyone.

I drank my coconut water. I needed to get home quickly because I had an interview with Juan Arias from the Spanish newspaper El País. On the way back, I noticed that the man was still there, lying in the sun, and everyone who passed did exactly the same as I had: glanced at him and then moved on.

Although I didn't know it, my soul was weary of seeing the same scene over and over. When I passed the man again, something stronger than myself made me kneel down and try to lift him up.

He did not respond. I turned his head and noticed blood on his temple. What now? Was it a bad wound? I dabbed at his skin with my T-shirt; it didn't look like anything serious.

At that moment, the man began muttering something about 'make them stop hitting me'. So he was alive; now what I needed to do was to get him out of the sun and to call the police.

I stopped the first man who passed and asked him to help me drag the injured man over to the shade between the sea front and the beach. He was wearing a suit and carrying a briefcase and various packages, but he put these down to help me - his soul was weary of seeing that same scene too.

Once we had placed the man in the shade, I headed off to my house. I knew there was a Military Police post nearby where I could ask for help. But before I got there, I met two policemen.

'There's a man who's been beaten up opposite number so-and-so,' I said. 'I've laid him down on the sand. It would be a good idea to call an ambulance.'

The two policemen said they would take steps. Right, I had done my duty. A boy scout is always prepared. My good deed for the day. The problem was in other hands now; it was up to them to deal with it. And the Spanish journalist would be arriving at my house at any moment.

I had not gone ten steps, when a stranger stopped me. In garbled Portuguese he said:

'I've already told the police about the man. They said that since he's not a thief, he's not their problem.'

I did not let the man finish. I walked back to where the policemen were standing, convinced that they would know who I was, that I wrote for the newspapers, that I appeared on television. I did so under the false impression that sometimes success can help to resolve matters.

'Are you some kind of official?' one of them asked when I became more insistent in my request for help.

They had no idea who I was.

'No, but we're going to resolve this problem right now.'

There I was all sweaty and dressed in a blood-stained T-shirt and a pair of Bermuda shorts made from some old cut-down jeans. I was just an ordinary, anonymous man with no authority apart from my own weariness with all

those years of seeing people lying on the ground and never doing anything about it.

And that changed everything. There are moments when you are suddenly free from any inhibitions or fears. There are moments when your eyes have a different light and people know that you are absolutely serious. The policemen went with me and called an ambulance.

On my way back home, I went over the three lessons I had learned from that walk: (a) Anyone can abandon an action when it's purely at the stage of romanticism. (b) There is always someone to tell you: 'Now that you've started, finish.' And (c) everyone has the authority of an official when he or she is absolutely convinced of what he or she is doing.

Nhá Chica of Baependi

What is a miracle?

There is a definition for every kind of miracle: it may be something that goes against the laws of nature, an act of divine intervention at a moment of great crisis, something which is considered scientifically impossible, etc.

I have my own definition: a miracle is something that fills the soul with peace. Sometimes it manifests itself in the form of a cure or a wish granted, it doesn't matter - the end result is that, when the miracle occurs, we feel a profound reverence for the grace God has granted us.

Twenty or more years ago, when I was going through my hippie phase, my sister asked me to be godfather to her first daughter. I was thrilled and I was especially pleased that she did not ask me to cut my hair (at the time, it was

down to my waist), nor demand an expensive christening present (I didn't have any money to buy one).

The baby was born, a year went by and no christening. I thought perhaps my sister had changed her mind and so I went to ask her what had happened. She replied: 'You're still the godfather, it's just that I made a promise to Nhá Chica and I want to have her christened in Baependi because she granted my wish.'

I didn't know where Baependi was and I had never even heard of Nhá Chica. My hippie phase passed, and I became an executive working for a record company, my sister had another child and still no christening. Finally, in 1978, a decision was taken, and the two families, hers and that of her ex-husband, went to Baependi. There I learned that Nhá Chica, who did not have enough money to keep herself, had spent the last thirty years building a church and helping the poor.

I was going through a very turbulent period in my life and I no longer believed in God, or,

rather, I no longer believed that the spiritual world was very important. What mattered were the things of this world and what you could achieve here. I had abandoned the mad dreams of my youth - amongst them was that of becoming a writer - and I had no intention of going back to that dream-world. I was in that church merely to fulfil a social duty. While I was waiting for the christening to begin, I started wandering around outside and I ended up going into Nhá Chica's humble little house next to the church. Two rooms, a small altar with a few images of saints, and a vase containing two red roses and one white rose.

On an impulse, quite out of keeping with my thinking at the time, I made a promise: If, one day, I manage to become the writer I would like to be, I will come back here when I'm fifty years old and I will bring two red roses and one white rose.

I bought a picture of Nhá Chica, purely as a souvenir of the christening. On the way back to Rio, there was an accident: the bus in front of

me suddenly braked and, with split-second timing, I somehow managed to swerve out of the way, as did my brother-in-law, but the car behind us ran straight into the bus, there was an explosion and several people were killed. We parked at the roadside, not knowing what to do. I reached into my pocket for a cigarette and there was the picture of Nhá Chica with her silent message of protection.

My journey back to dreams, to the spiritual search and to literature began right there, and one day, I found myself back fighting the Good Fight, the fight you undertake with your heart full of peace, because it is the result of a miracle. I never forgot the three roses. Finally, my fiftieth birthday - which had seemed so far off at the time - arrived.

And it almost passed by. During the World Cup, though, I went to Baependi to fulfil my promise. Someone saw me arriving in Caxambú (where I spent the night), and a journalist came to interview me. When I told him what I was doing, he said:

'Would you like to talk about Nhá Chica. Her body was exhumed this week and the beatification process is with the Vatican now. People should be giving their accounts of their experiences with her.'

'No,' I said. 'It's too personal. I'll only talk about it if I receive a sign.'

And I thought to myself: 'What sign would that be? The only possible sign would be someone speaking on her behalf!'

The next day, I bought the flowers, got into my car and went to Baependi. I stopped some way from the church, remembering the record company executive who had gone there all those years before and the many things that had brought me back again. As I was going into the house, a young woman came out of a dress shop and said:

'I noticed that your book Maktub is dedicated to Nhá Chica. I bet she was really pleased.'

And she said nothing else. But that was the sign I was waiting for. And this is the public statement I needed to make.

Reading the signs

An acquaintance of mine ended up in serious financial difficulties because he could never manage to bring together dream and reality. Worse, he dragged others down with him, harming people he had no wish to hurt.

Unable to repay the debts he had accumulated, he even considered suicide. Then one afternoon, as he was walking down a street, he saw a house in ruins. 'That building is me,' he thought, and at that precise moment, he felt an immense desire to rebuild the house.

He found out who the owner was and offered to carry out the necessary work; the owner agreed, although he could not understand what my friend stood to gain. Together they managed to get hold of roof tiles, wood, sand and cement. My friend put his whole heart into the work, though without

knowing why or for whom. But as the renovation work progressed, he felt his personal life improving.

By the end of the year, the house was ready. And all his personal problems had been solved.

Mahatma Gandhi goes shopping

After he had won independence for India, Mahatma Gandhi visited England. He was walking through the streets of London with some other people when his attention was drawn to the shop window of a famous jeweller's.

Gandhi stood there studying the precious stones and the exquisitely made jewellery. The owner of the shop recognised him at once and came out into the street to greet him.

'I am greatly honoured by your presence here, looking at our work. We have many objects of immense value, beauty and artistry and we would like to give you something.'

'Yes, I'm amazed by all these marvellous things,' replied Gandhi. 'And I'm even more

surprised at myself, for, even knowing that I could receive a valuable present, I nevertheless can manage to live and be respected without the need of jewels.'

Teaching the horse to fly

Let us divide the word 'preoccupation' into two parts - pre-occupation, that is, occupying your mind with something before it actually happens. This is what worrying is: trying to resolve problems that have not even had time to appear; imagining that things, when they do happen, will always turn out for the worst.

Naturally there are exceptions. One of them is the hero of this little story.

An old king of India condemned a man to the gallows. When the king had finished reading the sentence, the condemned man said:

'You are a wise man, Your Majesty, and curious about everything that your subjects do. You respect gurus, sages, snake-charmers and fakirs. Well, when I was a child, my grandfather taught me how to make a white horse fly. Since

there is no one else in the whole kingdom who knows how to do this, my life should be spared.'

The king immediately ordered a white horse to be brought.

'I need to spend two years with this animal,' said the condemned man.

'All right, you will have two years,' replied the king, already somewhat suspicious. 'But if this horse does not learn to fly, you will be hanged.'

Overjoyed, the man left with the horse. When he reached his house, he found his whole family in tears.

'Are you mad?' they all cried. 'Since when has anyone in this house known how to make a horse fly?'

'Don't worry,' he said. 'First of all, no one has ever tried to teach a horse to fly, and the horse might well learn. Secondly, the king is already very old and he might die in the next two years. Thirdly, the horse might die and then I'll be given another two years to teach the new horse - not to mention the possibility of

revolutions, coups d'état and general amnesties. And even if everything remains exactly as it is, I will still have gained two years of life with which I can do anything I like. Does that seem little to you?'

How to keep Hell full

According to a traditional story, at the moment when the Son of God expired on the cross, He went straight to Hell in order to save sinners.

The Devil was most put out.

'I have no other function in the universe,' he said. 'From now on, all the delinquents who broke the rules, committed adultery and infringed the religious laws will be sent straight to Heaven!'

Jesus looked at him and smiled:

'Don't worry,' he said to the poor Devil. 'All those who judge themselves to be full of virtue and therefore spend their lives condemning those who follow my word, they will come here. Just wait a few hundred years and you'll find that Hell is fuller than ever!'

The monastery might close

The monastery was having a difficult time. According to the latest fashionable idea, God was just a superstition, and young men no longer wanted to become novices. Some went to study sociology, others read treatises on historical materialism, and gradually the small community that remained realised that they would have to close the monastery.

The old monks were dying. When one of them was about to deliver up his soul to God, he summoned to his death bed the few novices who were left.

'I have received a revelation,' he said. 'This monastery was chosen for something very important.'

'What a shame,' said one novice. 'There are only five of us left and we can barely cope with the ordinary tasks, let alone something important.'

'It is indeed a great shame. Because an angel appeared to me here on my death bed and told me that one of you five young men was destined to become a saint.'

And with that, he died.

During the funeral, the young men kept looking at each other in some alarm. Who would be the chosen one? The one who had given most help to the villagers? The one who always prayed with particular devotion? The one who preached with such fervour that he reduced the others to tears?

Moved by the thought that there was a saint amongst them, the novices resolved to postpone the closure of the monastery for a while and they began working hard, preaching enthusiastically, repairing the crumbling walls and practising charity and love.

One day, a young man came to the monastery door. He was impressed by the work of the five novices and wanted to help them. Only a week later, another young man did the same. Little by little, the novices' reputation spread throughout the region.

'Their eyes shine,' said a son to his father, when asking to be given permission to enter the monastery.

'They do things with such love,' remarked one father to his son. 'Look, the monastery is more beautiful than ever.'

Ten years later, there were more than eighty novices. No one ever found out if the old monk's prediction was true, or if he had merely found a way of using enthusiasm to restore to the monastery its lost dignity.

The importance of prayer

One day, a man received a visit from some friends.

'We would very much like it if you could teach us what you have learned over the years,' said one of them.

'I'm old,' said the man.

'Old and wise,' said another of his friends. 'All these years, we have watched you praying. What do you talk to God about? What are the important things we should be praying for?'

The man smiled.

'In the beginning, I had the fervour of youth, which believes in the impossible. In those days, I used to kneel before God and ask him to give me the strength to change humankind. Gradually, I came to see that the

task was beyond me. Then I started praying to God to help me change the world around me.'

'Well, we can certainly vouch for the fact that part of your wish was granted,' said one of his friends. 'For you have helped many people by your example.'

'Yes, I have helped many people by my example, and yet I knew that I had not yet found the perfect prayer. Only now, at the end of my life, have I come to understand what I should have been praying for from the start.'

'And what is that?'

'To be given the ability to change myself.'

The prayer that I forgot

I was out walking one day in São Paulo, when a friend - Edinho - handed me a pamphlet entitled Sacred Moment. Printed in four colours, on excellent paper, with no mention of any particular church or religion, this pamphlet bore only a prayer on its reverse side.

Imagine my surprise when I saw the name of the author of this prayer - ME! It had been published in the early eighties on the inside cover of a book of poetry. I did not think it would stand the test of time, nor that it would return to my hands in such a mysterious way; but when I re-read it, I did not feel ashamed of what I had written.

Because it appeared in that pamphlet and because I believe in signs, I felt it only right to reproduce it here. I hope it encourages every reader to write a prayer of their own, asking for

themselves and for others the things that they judge to be most important. That way we place a positive vibration in our heart which touches everything around us.

Here is the prayer:

Lord, protect our doubts, because Doubt is a way of praying. It is Doubt that makes us grow because it forces us to look fearlessly at the many answers that exist to one question. And in order for this to be possible…

Lord, protect our decisions, because making Decisions is a way of praying. Give us the courage, after our doubts, to be able to choose between one road and another. May our YES always be a YES and our NO always be a NO. Once we have chosen our road, may we never look back nor allow our soul to be eaten away by remorse. And in order for this to be possible…

Lord, protect our actions, because Action is a way of praying. May our daily bread be the result of the very best that we carry within us. May we, through work and Action, share a little

of the love we receive. And in order for this to be possible…

Lord, protect our dreams, because to Dream is a way of praying. Make sure that, regardless of our age or our circumstances, we are capable of keeping alight in our heart the sacred flame of hope and perseverance. And in order for this to be possible…

Lord, give us enthusiasm, because Enthusiasm is a way of praying. It is what binds us to the Heavens and to Earth, to grown-ups and to children, it is what tells us that our desires are important and deserve our best efforts. It is Enthusiasm that reaffirms to us that everything is possible, as long as we are totally committed to what we are doing. And in order for this to be possible…

Lord, protect us, because Life is the only way we have of making manifest Your miracle. May the earth continue to transform seeds into wheat, may we continue to transmute wheat into bread. And this is only possible if we have Love; therefore, do not leave us in solitude.

Always give us Your company, and the company of men and women who have doubts, who act and dream and feel enthusiasm, and who live each day as if it were totally dedicated to Your glory. Amen

The elephant and the rope

This is the procedure adopted by circus trainers to ensure that elephants never rebel - and I suspect that it is also what happens with a lot of people.

When still a baby, the elephant is tethered by a very thick rope to a stake firmly hammered into the ground. The elephant tries several times to get free, but it lacks the strength to do so.

After a year, the stake and the rope are still strong enough to keep a small elephant tethered, although it continues to try, unsuccessfully, to get free. At this point, the animal realises that the rope will always be too strong and so it gives up.

When it reaches adulthood, the elephant can still remember how, for a long time, it had

wasted its energies trying to escape captivity. At this stage, the trainer can tether the elephant with a slender thread tied to a broom handle, and the elephant will make no attempt to escape to freedom.

The mother giraffe makes her child suffer

The giraffe gives birth standing up, so the first thing that happens to a new-born giraffe is a fall of about two metres.

Still dazed, the baby tries to stand up on its four legs, but its mother behaves very strangely: she gives the baby giraffe a gentle kick which sends it sprawling. It tries to get up and is again knocked down.

This process is repeated several times, until the new-born giraffe is too exhausted to stand. At that point, the mother kicks it again, forcing it to get to its feet. After that, she does not push the baby giraffe over again.

The explanation is simple: in order to survive predators, the first lesson a giraffe must learn is to get to its feet quickly. The mother's

apparent cruelty finds support in an Arabic proverb: 'Sometimes, in order to teach something good, you have to be a little rough.'

The carp learns to grow

The Japanese carp or koi has the natural ability to grow according to the size of its environment. Thus, in a small tank, it usually grows to no more than five to seven centimetres, but if placed in a lake, it can grow to three times that size.

In the same way, people tend to grow according to their environment, although we are not talking here about physical characteristics, but about emotional, spiritual and intellectual development.

While the carp is obliged, for its own well-being, to accept the limits of its world, we are free to set the boundaries of our own dreams. If we are a bigger fish than the tank in which we were bred, instead of adapting to it, we should go in search of the ocean, even if the initial

adaptation period proves uncomfortable and painful.

Getting rid of ghosts

For years, Hitoshi tried in vain to awaken the love of the woman he believed to be the love of his life. But fate is ironic: on the very day that she finally accepted him as her future husband, she learned that she had an incurable disease and would not live for very much longer.

Six months later, when she was about to die, she said to him:

'Promise me one thing: never fall in love with anyone else. If you do, I will come every night to haunt you.'

And then she closed her eyes for ever. For many months, Hitoshi avoided other women, but fate continued to be ironic, and he discovered a new love. When he was preparing to remarry, the ghost of his ex-beloved kept her promise and appeared to him.

'You are betraying me,' the ghost said.

'For years, I offered you my heart and you rejected me,' replied Hitoshi. 'Don't you think I deserve a second chance of happiness?'

But the ghost of his ex-beloved was not interested in excuses and came every night to frighten him. It described in detail what had happened during the day, the words of love that he had spoken to his fiancée, the kisses and embraces they had exchanged.

Hitoshi could no longer sleep and so he went to consult the Zen master Basho.

'It's certainly a very intelligent ghost,' said Basho.

'It knows everything down to the last detail! And now it's ruining my relationship because I can't sleep and during intimate moments with my fiancée, I feel somehow constrained.'

'Don't worry, we'll get rid of the ghost,' said Basho.

That night, when the ghost returned, Hitoshi spoke first, before the ghost could say a word.

'You're such a clever ghost, I'd like to make a deal with you. Since you watch me all the time, I'm going to ask you about something I did today. If you answer correctly, I will give up my fiancée and never take another wife. If you answer wrongly, you must promise never to appear again, or else be condemned by the gods to wander for ever in the darkness.'

'Agreed,' replied the ghost confidently.

'This afternoon, when I was in the grocer's shop, at one point, I picked up a handful of grain from a sack.'

'Yes, I saw you,' said the ghost.

'My question is the following: how many grains of wheat did I have in my hand?'

The ghost realised that it would never be able to answer that question and, in order to avoid being pursued by the gods into eternal darkness, it decided to disappear for ever.

Two days later, Hitoshi went to Basho's house.

'I came to thank you.'

'Be sure to learn the lessons your experience has taught you,' said Basho. 'First: the spirit kept coming back because you were afraid. If you want to rid yourself of a curse, simply ignore it. Second: the ghost took advantage of your feelings of guilt. Whenever we feel guilty, we always unconsciously long to be punished. And finally, no one who truly loved you, would force you to make such a promise. If you want to understand love, first learn about freedom.'

The two angels

In the year 1476, two men are standing in a medieval church, talking. They pause for a few moments before a painting showing two angels, hand in hand, walking towards a city.

'We are living through the horrors of the bubonic plague,' says one of the men. 'People are dying. I don't want to see images of angels.'

'This painting is about the Plague,' says the other man. 'It is a representation of the Golden Legend. The angel dressed in red is Lucifer, the Evil One. Notice that attached to his belt he has a small bag; inside that bag is the epidemic that has devastated our lives and those of our families.'

The man studies the painting carefully. Lucifer really is carrying a small bag; however, the angel leading him along looks serene, peace-loving and enlightened.

'If Lucifer is bringing the Plague, who is the other angel leading him by the hand?'

'He is the angel of the Lord, the messenger of Good. Without his permission, the Evil One would be unable to reveal himself.'

'What is he doing, then?'

'He is showing him the place where men are to be purified by a tragedy.'

The fact

Edmund Hillary was the first man to climb Everest, the highest mountain in the world. His success coincided with the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, to whom he dedicated the conquest and from whom he received a knighthood.

Hillary had made another attempt the year before, but had failed completely. Nevertheless, the English had recognized his efforts and invited him to speak to a packed audience.

Hillary began by describing his difficulties and, despite the applause, said that he felt frustrated and inept. At one point, however, he moved away from the microphone, went over to the enormous drawing illustrating his route and shouted out:

'You may have beaten me this time, Mount Everest, but I'll conquer you next year for the

simple reason that you've got as tall as you're going to get, but I'm still growing!'

The perfect woman

Nasrudin was talking to a friend, who asked him:

'Have you never considered getting married, Mullah?'

'I have,' replied Nasrudin. 'In my youth, I resolved to find the perfect woman. I crossed the desert and reached Damascus, and I met a lovely, very spiritual woman, but she knew nothing of the world. I continued my journey and went to Isfahan; there I met a woman who knew both the spiritual and the material world, but she was not pretty. Then I decided to go to Cairo, where I dined in the house of a beautiful woman, who was both religious and a connoisseur of material reality.'

'Why didn't you marry her, then?'

'Alas, my friend, she was looking for the perfect man.'

The duck and the cat

'How did you enter the spiritual life?' asked a disciple of the Sufi master Shams Tabrizi.

'My mother said that I wasn't mad enough for the madhouse or holy enough for the monastery,' replied Tabrizi. 'So I decided to devote myself to Sufism, in which we learn through free meditation.'

'And how did you explain that to your mother?'

'By telling her the following fable: someone placed a duckling in the care of a female cat. He followed his adoptive mother everywhere; then, one day, they came to the edge of a lake. The duck immediately plunged into the water, while the cat called out from the shore:

'Come out of there at once, you'll drown!'

And the duckling replied:

'No, I won't, Mama, I've discovered what is good for me and I know that I'm in my element. And I'm going to stay here even though you don't understand what a lake is for.'

The fish who saved my life

Nasrudin is walking past a cave when he sees a yogi, deep in meditation, and he asks the yogi what he is searching for. The yogi says:

'I study the animals and have learned many lessons from them that can transform a man's life.'

'A fish once saved my life,' Nasrudin replies. 'If you teach me everything you know, I will tell you how it happened.'

The Yogi is astonished; only a holy man could be saved by a fish. And he decides to teach Nasrudin everything he knows.

When he has finished, he says to Nasrudin:

'Now that I have taught you everything, I would be proud to know how a fish saved your life.'

'Very simple,' says Nasrudin, 'I was almost dying of hunger when I caught it and, thanks to that fish, I had enough food for three days.'

The desire must be strong

A teacher took his disciple to a lake.

'Today, I'm going to show you what true devotion means,' he said.

He asked his disciple to wade with him into the lake, then he grasped the boy's head and held it under the water.

The first minute passed. In the middle of the second minute, the boy was struggling as hard as he could to free himself from his teacher's hands and return to the surface.

At the end of the second minute, the teacher released him. The boy stood up, heart pounding, gasping for breath.

'You tried to kill me!' he screamed.

The teacher waited for him to calm down and said:

'I wasn't trying to kill you; if I had been, you wouldn't be here now. I just wanted to find out what you felt when you were under the water.'

'I felt as if I was dying! All I wanted was to be able to breathe a little air.'

'Exactly. True devotion only appears when we have only one desire and we will die if we cannot achieve it.'

The road that leads to heaven

When Father Antonio was asked if the road of sacrifice led to heaven, he replied:

'There are two roads of sacrifice. The first is that taken by the man who mortifies his flesh and does penance because he believes that we are all damned. This man feels guilty and judges himself unworthy to be happy. He will get nowhere, because God does not live in guilt. The second is that taken by the man who, knowing that the world is not as perfect as we would all like, nevertheless prays, does penance and gives his time and labour to improving his surroundings. He understands that the word "sacrifice" comes from "sacro oficio" - holy work or service. The Divine Presence helps him all the time and he will be rewarded in Heaven.'

Virtue that offends

Abbot Pastor was out walking with a monk from Sceta when they were invited to a meal. The owner of the house, honoured by the monks' presence, ordered that only the very best of everything should be served.

However, the monk was in the middle of a period of fasting, and when the food arrived, he took a single pea and chewed it very slowly. He ate only that one pea during the whole of supper.

As they were leaving, the Abbot said to him:

'Brother, when you go to visit someone, do not make of your sanctity an insult. The next time you are fasting simply decline any invitations to supper.'

The monk understood what the Abbot meant. From then on, whenever he was with other people, he did as they did.

The problem and it's cause

One of the monks of Sceta said to Abbot Mateus:

'My tongue is always causing me problems. When I am amongst the faithful, I just can't control myself and I end up condemning their wrong actions.'

The old abbot said to the distraught monk:

'If you really don't think you are capable of controlling yourself, then leave teaching and go back to the desert. But don't delude yourself: choosing solitude as an escape from a problem is always a proof of weakness.'

'What should I do then?'

'Admit that you have some faults in order to avoid any pernicious feelings of superiority.

And do your best to get things right when you can.'

How to please the Lord

A novice once went to Abbot Macario to ask his advice on how best to please the Lord.

'Go to the cemetery and insult the dead,' said Macario.

The brother did as he was told. The following day, he went back to Macario.

'Did they respond?' asked the Abbot.

'No,' said the novice.

'Then go and praise them instead.'

The novice obeyed. That same afternoon, he went back to the Abbot, who again asked if the dead had responded.

'No, they didn't,' said the novice.

'In order to please the Lord, do exactly as they did,' Macario told him. 'Take no notice of men's scorn or of their praise; in that way, you will be able to build your own path.'

Mogo always wants something better

Many years ago, there lived in China a young man called Mogo, who earned his living breaking stones. Although he was strong and healthy, he was not contented with his lot and complained about it day and night. He so blasphemed against God that, in the end, his guardian angel appeared to him.

'You're healthy and you have your whole life before you,' said the angel. 'All young men start off doing the same sort of job as you. Why are you always complaining?'

'God has treated me unfairly and has not given me the chance to grow,' replied Mogo.

Concerned, the angel went to ask the Lord for his help in ensuring that his protégé did not end up losing his soul.

'Do as you wish,' said the Lord. 'Everything that Mogo wants will be granted to him.'

The following day, Mogo was, as usual, breaking stones when he saw a carriage pass by bearing a nobleman laden with jewels. Wiping the sweat from his dirty face, Mogo said bitterly:

'Why can't I be a nobleman too? That is my destiny!'

'So be it!' murmured his angel, delighted.

And Mogo was transformed into the owner of a sumptuous palace with a vast estate, with many servants and horses. He used to go out every day with his impressive train of followers and enjoyed seeing his former companions lined up at the roadside, gazing respectfully up at him.

On one such afternoon, the heat was unbearable; even under his golden parasol, Mogo was sweating as much as he used to in his days as a breaker of stones. He realised then that he wasn't really that important: above him were princes and emperors, but higher than them all was the sun, who obeyed no one - the sun was the true king.

'Dear angel, why can't I be the sun? That must be my destiny!' whined Mogo.

'So be it!' exclaimed the angel, concealing his sadness at such vaulting ambition.

And Mogo became the sun, as he had wanted.

While he was shining in the sky, admired for his immense power to ripen the grain or scorch it as he wished, a black spot started moving towards him. The dark stain grew larger and larger, and Mogo realised that it was a cloud spreading all around him, so that he could not longer see the Earth.

'Angel!' cried Mogo. 'The cloud is stronger than the sun! My destiny is to be a cloud!'

'So be it!' replied the angel.

Mogo was transformed into a cloud and he thought he had finally realised his dream.

'I'm so powerful!' he yelled as he obscured the sun.

'I'm invincible!' he thundered as he chased the waves.

But on the deserted ocean shore stood a vast granite rock, as old as the world itself. Mogo thought that the rock was defying him and unleashed a storm such as the world had never seen. Vast, furious waves lashed the rock, trying to wrench it from the earth and hurl it into the depths of the sea.

Firm and impassive, the rock remained where it was.

'Angel,' sobbed Mogo, 'the rock is stronger than the cloud! My destiny is to be a rock!'

And Mogo was transformed into that rock.

'Who can vanquish me now?' he wondered. 'I am the most powerful thing in the world!'

And so several years passed, until, one morning, Mogo felt something stabbing into his stone entrails, this was followed by intense pain, as if part of his granite body was being broken into pieces. Then he heard dull, insistent thuds and felt again that terrible pain.

Mad with fear, he cried:

'Angel, someone is trying to kill me! He has more power than I do, I want to be like him!'

'So be it!' exclaimed the angel, weeping.

And that was how Mogo went back to breaking stones.

(A story sent by Shirlei Massapust)

Sometimes confrontation is best

This is to be my main appearance at the Writers' Festival in Melbourne, Australia. It is ten o'clock in the morning and there is a packed audience. I am to be interviewed by a local writer, John Felton.

I step onto the platform with my usual feelings of apprehension. Felton introduces me and starts asking me questions. Before I can finish what I'm saying, he interrupts me and asks me another question. When I reply, he says something like 'that wasn't a very clear answer'. Five minutes later, there is a feeling of unease amongst the audience; everyone can sense that something is wrong. I remember Confucius and take the only possible action.

'Do you like what I write?' I ask.

'That's irrelevant,' Felton replies. 'I'm here to interview you, not the other way round.'

'But it is relevant. You won't let me finish my thought. Confucius says: "Whenever possible, be clear." Let's follow that advice and make things absolutely clear: Do you like what I write?'

'No, I don't. I've read two of your books and I hated both of them.'

'Fine, now we can continue.'

The lines of battle have been drawn. The audience relaxes and the atmosphere becomes electric, the interview becomes a real debate, and everyone - including Felton - is pleased with the result.

Kerry Lee and the writer

After delivering a lecture in Brisbane, Australia, I am leaving the auditorium in order to go and sign copies of my books. It is late afternoon, but the weather is so warm that the organisers have placed the table for the book-signing outside the library building.

People come over and chat and, even though I am far from home, I do not feel like a stranger: my books precede me and show my feelings and emotions.

Suddenly a twenty-two-year-old woman approaches, pushes her way through the line of people and faces me.

'I was too late for the lecture,' she says, 'but I have a few important things I would like to say to you.'

'I'm afraid that won't be possible,' I reply. 'I'll be signing books for another hour and then I have a supper to go to.'

'Oh, it will be perfectly possible,' she says. 'My name is Kerry Lee Olditch. I can tell you what I have to say right here and now, while you're signing books.'

And before I can say or do anything, she gets a violin out of her rucksack and begins to play.

I continue signing books for more than an hour, to the sound of Kerry Lee's music. The people do not leave, they stay behind for this unexpected concert, watching the sun go down and understanding what it was she needed to tell me and which she is now telling me.

When I have finished, she stops playing. There is no applause, nothing, only an almost palpable silence.

'Thank you,' I say.

'Everything in this life is a matter of sharing souls,' says Kerry Lee.

And just as she came, she leaves.

The hunter's apprentice

An old hunter of foxes, considered to be the best in the region, decided finally to retire. He gathered together his belongings and resolved to set off for the south of the country, where the climate was milder.

However, before he could finish packing up his things, he received a visit from a young man.

'I would like to learn your techniques,' said the newcomer. 'In exchange, I will buy your shop, your hunting license, and I will also pay you for all your secrets.'

The old man agreed, they signed a contract and he taught the young man all the secrets of fox-hunting. With the money he received, he bought a beautiful house in the south, where the climate was so mild that not once during the

whole winter did he have to worry about gathering wood for the fire.

In the spring, though, he felt nostalgic for his own village and decided to go back and see his friends.

When he arrived, he bumped into the young man who, some months before, had paid him a fortune for his secrets.

'So,' the old hunter said, 'how was the hunting season?'

'I didn't catch a single fox.'

The old man was surprised and confused.

'Didn't you follow my advice?'

With eyes downcast, the young man replied:

'Well, to be honest, no, I didn't. I thought your methods were out of date and I ended up discovering for myself a better way of hunting foxes.'

Be sure to keep the box

The old man had worked all his life. When he retired, he bought a farm for his son to manage and decided to spend the rest of his days sitting on the verandah of the big house.

His son worked for three years. Then he began to grow resentful.

'My father doesn't do a thing,' he said to his friends. 'He spends all his time staring out at the garden, while I slave away in order to feed him.'

One day, he resolved to put an end to this unfair situation. He built a large wooden box, went over to the verandah and said:

'Pa, would you mind getting into this box?'

His father obeyed. His son placed the box in the back of his truck and drove to the edge of a precipice. Just as he was preparing to push the box over, his heard his father say:

'Son, throw me over the edge if you must, but be sure to keep the box. You're setting an example here, and your children will doubtless need the box for you.'

The blackbird comes to a decision

An old blackbird found a piece of bread and flew off with it. When they saw this, the younger birds pursued him in order to attack.

Confronted by imminent battle, the blackbird dropped the piece of bread into the mouth of a snake, thinking to himself:

'When you're old, you see things differently. I lost a meal, it's true, but I can always find another piece of bread tomorrow. However, if I had hung on to it, I would have started a war in the skies; the winner would become the object of envy, the others would gang up on him, hatred would fill the hearts of birds and it could all go on for years. That is the wisdom of old age: knowing how to exchange immediate victories for lasting conquests.'

The importance of the cat in meditation

A great Zen master, in charge of the monastery of Mayu Kagi, owned a cat, who was the real love of his life. During meditation classes, he always kept the cat by his side, in order to enjoy its company as much as possible.

One morning, the master, who was already quite old, was found dead. The oldest disciple took his place.

'What shall we do with the cat?' asked the other monks.

In homage to the memory of his former teacher, the new master decided to allow the cat to continue attending the classes on Zen Buddhism.

Some disciples from neighbouring monasteries, who travelled widely in the region,

discovered that, in one of the most famous temples in the area, a cat took part in the meditations. The story began to spread.

Many years passed. The cat died, but the students at the monastery were so used to its presence that they acquired another cat. Meanwhile, the other temples began introducing cats into their meditation classes; they believed that the cat was the one actually responsible for Mayu Kagi's fame and for the quality of his teaching, forgetting what an excellent teacher the former master had been.

A generation passed, and technical treatises on the importance of the cat in Zen meditation began to be published. A university professor developed a thesis, accepted by the academic community, that the cat had the ability to increase human concentration and to eliminate negative energy.

And thus, for a century, the cat was considered to be an essential part of the study of Zen Buddhism in that region.

Then a master arrived who was allergic to cat hair, and he decided to remove the cat from his daily practices with the students. Everyone protested, but the master insisted. Since he was a gifted teacher, the students continued to make progress, despite the cat's absence.

Gradually, monasteries - always in search of new ideas and weary of having to feed so many cats - began to remove cats from the classroom. Over the next twenty years, revolutionary new theses were written, bearing persuasive titles like 'The importance of meditating without a cat' or 'Balancing the Zen universe by the power of one's mind alone and without the aid of animals'.

Another century passed, and the cat vanished completely from the Zen meditation ritual in that region. But it took two hundred years for everything to return to normal, and all because, during that time, no one thought to ask why the cat was there.

A writer who learned of this story centuries later, wrote in his diary:

'And how many of us, in our own lives, ever dare to ask: why do I behave in such and such a way? In what we do, how far are we too using futile 'cats' that we do not have the courage to get rid of because we were told that the 'cats' were important in keeping everything running smoothly?'

The impatient disciple

After an exhausting morning session of prayer in the monastery of Piedra, the novice asked the abbot:

'Do all these prayers that you teach us make God move closer to us?'

'I'm going to reply with another question,' said the abbot. 'Will all the prayers you say make the sun rise tomorrow?'

'Of course not! The sun rises in obedience to a universal law.'

'Well, there's the answer to your question. God is close to us regardless of how much we pray.'

The novice was shocked.

'Are you saying that our prayers are useless?'

'Absolutely not. If you don't wake up early enough, you will never get to see the sunrise.

And although God is always close, if you don't pray, you will never manage to feel His presence.'

I want to find God

A man arrived, exhausted, at a monastery.

'I have been looking for God for a long time,' he said. 'Perhaps you can teach me the right way to find Him.'

'Come in and see our monastery,' said the monk, taking his hand and leading him into the chapel. 'Here you can see some of the finest works of art of the sixteenth century, portraying the life of the Lord and His glory amongst men.'

The man waited while the monk explained each of the beautiful paintings and sculptures adorning the chapel. Afterwards, he asked again:

'Everything I have seen is very beautiful, but I would like to learn the right way to find God.'

'Ah, God!' exclaimed the monk. 'You're quite right, yes, God!'

And he led the man into the refectory, where the monks' supper was being prepared.

'Look around you. Supper will be served shortly, and you are invited to join us. You can listen to the reading of the Scriptures while you satisfy your hunger.'

'But I'm not hungry and I have read all the Scriptures,' insisted the man. 'I want to learn. I came here to find God.'

The monk again took the stranger by the hand and they began strolling around the cloisters surrounding a lovely garden.

'I ask my monks to keep the lawn well trimmed and to remove any dead leaves from the water in that fountain you can see in the middle. I think this is probably the cleanest monastery in the whole region.'

The stranger walked on a little way with the monk, then he excused himself, saying that he had to leave.

'Aren't you staying for supper?' asked the monk.

While he was getting back on his horse, the stranger said:

'Congratulations on your lovely chapel, your welcoming refectory and your impeccably clean courtyard. However, I have travelled many leagues in order to learn how to find God, not to be dazzled by efficiency, comfort and discipline.'

A lightning bolt fell from the sky, the horse neighed loudly, and the earth shook. Suddenly, the stranger tore off his disguise, and the monk found himself standing before Jesus.

'God is wherever you allow Him to enter in,' said Jesus. 'But you closed the door of this monastery to him by using rules, pride, wealth and ostentation. The next time a stranger comes wanting to find God, do not show him what you have achieved in His name; listen to the question and try to answer it with love, charity and simplicity.'

And with that, he disappeared.

The pool and Narcissus

Almost everyone knows the original Greek story about Narcissus: a beautiful boy who would go every day to contemplate his own face in the waters of a pool. He was so fascinated by himself that, one morning, when he was trying to get still closer to his reflection, he fell into the water and was drowned. In that place a flower sprang up, and we call that flower narcissus.

The writer Oscar Wilde, however, gives the story a rather different ending.

He says that when Narcissus died, the Oreads, who were goddesses of the woods, came and saw that the sweet waters of the pool had changed into salt tears.

'Why are you crying?' asked the Oreads.

'I'm weeping for Narcissus.'

'We do not wonder that you should mourn for Narcissus in this way,' they said. 'After all,

we could only run after him through the forest, but you could gaze on his beauty from close to.'

'But was Narcissus beautiful?' asked the pool.

'Who better than you to know?' the Oreads replied, somewhat taken aback. 'It was, after all, on your banks that he would lie each day.'

The pool was still for a moment. Then it said:

'I weep for Narcissus, but I never noticed that he was beautiful. I weep for him because whenever he lay on my banks and looked into my waters, I could see my own beauty reflected in his eyes.'

Our Lady's juggler

According to a medieval legend, Our Lady, with the Baby Jesus in her arms, decided to come down to Earth to visit a monastery.

Feeling very proud, the monks formed a long line and each stood in turn before the Virgin, wanting to pay tribute to mother and son. One read out some beautiful poems, others showed the illuminations they had made for the Bible, a third recited the names of all the saints. And so it went on, with monk after monk displaying his talent and his devotion.

Bringing up the rear was the most humble monk in the monastery, who had never read the learned texts of the age. His parents had been simple folk who had worked in a local circus, and the only thing they had taught him was to do a few juggling tricks with balls.

When it came to his turn, the other monks wanted to bring the tributes to a close because the former juggler had nothing important to say and might spoil the monastery's image. However, deep in his heart, he too felt a great need to give something of himself to Jesus and to the Virgin.

Greatly embarrassed and feeling his brothers' disapproving eyes on him, he took a few oranges out of his pocket and began juggling with them, since it was the only thing he knew how to do.

It was then that the Baby Jesus smiled and began to clap his hands, as he sat in Our Lady's lap. And it was to this monk that the Virgin held out her arms and allowed him to hold the child for a moment.

Too much renunciation

I met the painter Miie Tamaki during a seminar on Female Energy. I asked what her religion was.

'I don't have a religion any more,' she said.

Noticing my look of surprise, she added:

'I was brought up as a Buddhist. The monks taught me that the spiritual road was one of constant renunciation: we must overcome our feelings of envy and hatred, any doubts about our faith and any desires. I managed to free myself from all of that until one day my heart was empty; my sins had all disappeared, but so had my human nature. At first, I was very pleased, but I came to realise that I no longer shared the joys and passions of the people around me. That was when I abandoned religion. Now I have my conflicts, my moments of rage and despair, but I know that I am once

more close to other people and, therefore, close to God.'

Understanding cobwebs

When I was travelling the road to Rome, one of the four sacred roads in my magical tradition, I realised, after almost twenty days spent entirely alone, that I was in a much worse state than when I had started. In my solitude, I began to have mean, nasty, ignoble feelings.

I sought out my guide to the road and told her about this. I said that when I had set out on that pilgrimage, I had thought I would grow closer to God, but that, after three weeks, I was feeling a great deal worse.

'You are getting better, don't worry,' she said. 'The fact is that when we turn on our inner light, the first thing we see are the cobwebs and the dust, our weak points. They were there already, it's just that you couldn't see them in the darkness. Now it will be much easier for you to clean out your soul.'

How to temper steel

Lynell Waterman tells the story of the blacksmith who decided to give up his youthful excesses and consecrate his soul to God. For many years, he worked hard and performed many acts of charity; yet despite all his devotion, nothing seemed to go right in his life. On the contrary, problems and debts merely seemed to mount up.

One afternoon, a friend was visiting him and, taking pity on the blacksmith's sorry situation, he said:

'It really is very strange that as soon as you decided to become a God-fearing man, your life should immediately have taken such a turn for the worse. I wouldn't want to weaken your faith, but, despite your firm belief in the spiritual world, nothing in your life has improved.'

The blacksmith did not reply at once; he had often thought the same thing himself, unable to understand what was happening in his life.

He wanted to give his friend an answer, however, and so he began to talk and ended up finding the explanation he was seeking. This is what the blacksmith said:

'The unworked steel arrives in my workshop and I have to make swords out of it. Do you know how that is done? First, I heat the metal until it is red-hot, then I beat it mercilessly with my heaviest hammer until the metal takes on the form I need. Then I plunge it into a bucket of cold water and the whole workshop is filled with the roar of steam, while the metal sizzles and crackles in response to the sudden change in temperature. I have to keep repeating that process until the sword is perfect: once is not enough.'

The blacksmith paused for a long time, lit a cigarette, then went on:

'Sometimes the steel I get simply can't withstand such treatment. The heat, the hammer blows, the cold water cause it to crack. And I know that I will never be able to make it into a good sword blade. Then I throw it on the pile of scrap metal that you saw at the entrance to the workshop.'

Another long pause, then the blacksmith concluded:

'I know that God is putting me through the fire of afflictions. I have accepted the blows that life deals out to me, and sometimes I feel as cold and indifferent as the water that inflicts such pain on the steel. But my one prayer is this: Please, God, do not give up until I have taken on the shape that You wish for me. Do this by whatever means You think best, for as long as You like, but never ever throw me on the scrap heap of souls.'

Satan holds a clearance sale

Conscious of the need to move with the times, Satan decided to sell off a large part of his stock of temptations. He placed an advertisement in the newspaper and spent the whole of the next day attending to customers in his workshop.

There were some amazing items for sale: stones on which the virtuous could stumble, mirrors that increased one's own sense of importance and spectacles that diminished other people's importance. Hanging on the wall were a few other prize objects: a dagger with a curved blade for stabbing people in the back and tape recorders that recorded only gossip and lies.

'Don't worry about the price!' cried old Satan to any potential customers. 'Take it away with you today and pay me when you can!'

One visitor noticed two much-used tools that had been relegated to a corner. They didn't look anything special, but they were very expensive. Curious, he asked the reason for this apparent discrepancy.

'They're both very worn because they're the tools I use most,' said Satan, laughing. 'I wouldn't want them to be too noticeable because then people would know how to protect themselves against them. But they're both worth the asking price: one is Doubt and the other is a Sense of Inferiority. When all other temptations fail, those two always work.'

Keeping the communication channels open

Rabbi Iaakov's wife was considered by all his friends to be an extremely difficult woman; she would start an argument on the slightest pretext.

Iaakov, however, never rose to these provocations.

Then, at his son Ishmael's wedding, when the hundreds of guests were happily celebrating, the Rabbi began insulting his wife, but in such a way that everyone at the party noticed.

'What's wrong?' asked a friend, when things had calmed down. 'What happened to your policy of never rising to her provocations?'

'See how much happier she looks,' whispered the Rabbi.

His wife did indeed appear to be enjoying the party.

'But you had an argument in public! I don't understand your reaction or hers!' insisted his friend.

'A few days ago, I realised that what most bothered my wife was my silence. By responding to her with silence, I seemed to be ignoring her and distancing myself from her with virtuous feelings, thus making her feel mean and inferior. I love her very much, and so I decided to blow my top at her in front of everyone. She saw then that I understood how she sometimes feels, that I was just the same as her, and that I still want to keep the channels of communication open.'

The male monkey and the female monkey have an argument

The male monkey and the female monkey were sitting on the branch of a tree watching the sunset. At one point, she said:

'What makes the sky change colour when the sun reaches the horizon?'

'If we tried to explain everything, we wouldn't be able to live,' replied the male monkey. 'Just sit quietly and let this romantic sunset fill our hearts with gladness.'

The female monkey grew angry.

'You're so primitive and superstitious. You're not interested in logic any more, you just want to enjoy life.'

At that moment, a centipede happened to be walking past.

'Centipede!' called the male monkey. 'How do you manage to move all those legs of yours in such perfect harmony?'

'I've never really thought about it,' came the reply.

'Well, think about it! My wife would like an explanation!'

The centipede looked at its legs and began:

'Well…first I move this muscle, no, no I don't, first, I have to sway my body in this direction…'

The centipede spent half an hour trying to explain how it moved its legs, and the harder it tried, the more confused it became. Wanting to continue on its way, it found it could no longer walk.

'See what you've done?' it cried out in despair. 'In my eagerness to explain how I work, I've forgotten how to move.'

'Now do you see what happens when someone tries to explain everything?' said the

male monkey, turning to enjoy the sunset in silence.

True importance

Jean was out walking with his grandfather in Paris. At one point, they saw a shoemaker being insulted by a customer who claimed that there was something wrong with his shoes. The shoemaker calmly listened to his complaints, apologised and promised to make good the mistake.

Jean and his grandfather stopped to have a coffee. At the next table, the waiter asked a man if he would mind moving his chair slightly so that he could get by. The man erupted in a torrent of abuse and refused to move.

'Never forget what you have seen,' said Jean's grandfather. 'The shoemaker accepted the customer's complaint, while this man next to us did not want to move. Men who perform some useful task are not bothered if they are treated as if they were useless, but men who do no

useful work at all always think themselves very important and hide their incompetence behind their authority.'

The gift of insults

Near Tokyo, there lived a very great Samurai who, now an old man, devoted himself to teaching Zen Buddhism to the young. Despite his great age, it was said that he could defeat any adversary.

One afternoon, he was visited by a warrior who was known to be entirely without scruples. This warrior was also famous for his technique of provocation; he would wait for his adversary to make the first move and then, using his exceptional intelligence to assess any errors made, he would launch a lightning counter-attack.

The impatient young warrior had never once lost a contest. He knew the Samurai's reputation and had gone there in order to defeat him and thus enhance his own reputation.

Despite his students' protests, the old Samurai accepted the warrior's challenge.

Everyone gathered in the city's main square, and the young man began insulting the old teacher. He threw a few stones at him, spat in his face, heaped every known insult both on him and on his ancestors. For hours, he did everything he could to provoke the Samurai, but the old man remained utterly impassive. By the end of the afternoon, the fiery warrior withdrew, exhausted and humiliated.

Disappointed that their teacher had failed to respond to these insults and provocations, his students asked:

'How could you put up with such indignities? Why, even though you risked losing the fight, did you not use your sword, rather than reveal yourself to us as a coward?'

'If someone comes to you with a gift, and you do not accept it, to whom does that gift belong?' asked the Samurai.

'To the person who tried to give it,' replied his disciples.

'The same applies to envy, anger and insults,' said the teacher. 'If they are not accepted, they remain the property of the person who carries them within himself.'

Where is the umbrella?

After ten years of study, Zenno believed that he was ready to be made a Zen master. One rainy day, he went to visit the famous teacher Nan-in.

When Zenno went into the house, Nan-in asked:

'Did you leave your umbrella and your shoes outside?'

'Of course, I did,' replied Zenno. 'It's only polite. I would do the same thing anywhere.'

'Then tell me this: did you place your umbrella to the right or to the left of your shoes?'

'I haven't the slightest idea, master.'

'Zen Buddhism is the art of being totally aware of one's every action,' said Nan-in. 'Lack of attention to apparently minor details can completely destroy a man's life. A father

hurrying out of his house must never leave a dagger within reach of his small son. A Samurai who does not polish his sword every day will find that when most he needs it, the sword has grown rusty. A young man who forgets to give flowers to his beloved will end up losing her.'

And Zenno understood that, although he had a good knowledge of Zen techniques when applied to the spiritual world, he had forgotten to apply them to the world of men.

Memory and salt

I arrive in Madrid at eight o'clock in the morning. I will only be here a few hours, so it's not worth phoning friends and arranging to see them. I decide to go for a walk alone in my favourite places, and I end up sitting smoking a cigarette on a bench in the Retiro Park.

'You look miles away,' says an old man, joining me on the bench.

'Oh, I'm here,' I say, 'but I'm sitting on this same bench with a painter friend of mine, Anastasio Ranchal, twelve years ago in 1986. We are both watching my wife, Christina, who has had a bit too much to drink and is trying to dance the flamenco.'

'Enjoy your memories,' says the old man. 'But don't forget that memory is like salt: the right amount brings out the flavour in food, too much ruins it. If you live in the past all the time,

you'll find yourself with no present to remember.'

What would you save?

A journalist went to interview Jean Cocteau, whose house was a jumble of ornaments, paintings, drawings by famous artists and books. Cocteau kept absolutely everything and felt a deep affection for every object. It was then, in the middle of the interview, that the journalist decided to ask Cocteau: 'If this house were to catch fire right now and you could take only one thing with you, what would you choose?'

'And what did he reply?' asks Álvaro Teixeira, a fellow guest at the castle where we were staying and himself an expert on Cocteau's life.

'Cocteau said: "I would take the fire."'

And there we all sat in silence, applauding in our hearts that brilliant response.

My friend writes a story

A friend of mine, Bruno Saint-Cast, works on various high-tech projects in Europe. One night, he woke up in the early hours and could not get back to sleep; he felt impelled to write about an old friend from his adolescence, whom he had met in Tahiti.

Even though he knew that he would have to work the next day, Bruno began writing a strange story in which his friend, John Salmon, was making a long voyage from Patagonia to Australia. While he was writing, he felt a sense of enormous freedom, as if inspiration were welling up inside him unimpeded.

As soon as he had finished writing the story, he received a telephone call from his mother. She had just heard that John Salmon had died.

The rabbi and forgiveness

This story is attributed to the great Rabbi Bal Shen Tov. It is said that he was standing on top of a hill with a group of students when he saw a band of Cossacks attack the city below and begin massacring the people.

Seeing many of his friends dying and begging for mercy, the Rabbi cried out:

'Oh, if only I were God!'

A shocked student turned to him and said:

'Master, how can you utter such a blasphemy? Do you mean that if you were God you would act differently? Do you mean that you think that God often does the wrong thing?'

The Rabbi looked the student in the eye and said:

'God is always right. But if I were God, I would be able to understand why this is happening.'

The law and the fruit

Fruit was very scarce in the desert. God summoned one of his prophets and said:

'Each person should be allowed to eat only one piece of fruit a day.'

The custom was obeyed for generations, and the ecology of the area was preserved. Since the uneaten fruit bore seeds, other trees grew up. Soon that whole region became very fertile, the envy of other cities.

However, faithful to the order an ancient prophet had passed on to their ancestors, the people continued to eat only one piece of fruit a day. Moreover, they would not allow the inhabitants of other towns to enjoy each year's abundant crop of fruit. The result: the fruit rotted on the ground.

God summoned a new prophet and said:

'Let them eat as much fruit as they like, and ask them to share out the surplus with their neighbours.'

The prophet arrived in the city with this new message, but so deeply rooted was the custom in their hearts and minds, that the city's inhabitants stoned him.

As time passed, the young people began to question this barbarous custom, but since the traditions of the elders were untouchable, they decided instead to abandon their religion. That way they could eat as much fruit as they liked and give the rest to those who needed it.

The only people who continued to attend the local church believed themselves to be most holy. In fact, they were merely incapable of seeing that the world changes and that we must change with it.

Without so much as blinking

During the civil war in Korea, a certain general and his troops were advancing implacably, taking province after province, destroying everything in their path. The people in one city, hearing that the general was approaching and knowing his cruel reputation, fled to a nearby mountain.

The troops found the houses empty. After much searching, though, they found one Zen monk who had stayed behind. The general ordered that he be brought before him, but the monk refused to go.

Furious, the general went to him instead.

'You obviously don't know who I am!' he bawled. 'I am capable of stabbing you in the

chest with my sword without so much as blinking.'

The Zen master turned and replied calmly:

'You obviously don't know who I am either. I am capable of letting myself be stabbed in the chest by a sword without so much as blinking.'

On hearing this, the general bowed low and left.

It's just a question of time

An orthodox Jew approached Rabbi Wolf and said:

'The bars are full to bursting and the people sit there into the small hours enjoying themselves!'

The Rabbi said nothing

'The bars are full to bursting, people spend all night playing cards, and you say nothing?'

'It's a good thing that the bars are full,' said Wolf. 'Everyone, since the beginning of Creation, has always wanted to serve God. The problem is that not everyone knows the best way to do so. Try to think of what you judge to be a sin as a virtue. These people who spend the night awake are learning alertness and persistence. When they have perfected these

qualities, then all they will have to do is turn their eyes to God. And what excellent servants they will make!'

'You're obviously an optimist,' said the man.

'It has nothing to do with optimism,' replied Wolf. 'It is merely a matter of understanding that whatever we do, however absurd it might seem, can lead us to the Path. It's all just a question of time.'

The suspicion that can transform a human being

There is a German folk tale about a man who woke up to find that his axe had disappeared. Furious and convinced that his neighbour had stolen it, he spent the rest of the day observing him.

He saw that he acted like a thief, that he had a thief's furtive way of walking and that he spoke in whispers like a thief trying to conceal his crime. He was so sure that his suspicions were correct that he decided to go back into the house, change his clothes and go straight down to the police station.

As soon as he went indoors, however, he found his axe, which his wife had moved from its usual place. The man went outside again and

again studied his neighbour, and he saw that he walked, spoke and behaved just like any other

The grove of cedar trees

In 1939, the Japanese diplomat Chiune Sugihara was working in the Japanese embassy in Lithuania during one of the most terrible periods humanity has known, and he saved thousands of Polish Jews from the Nazi threat by issuing them with exit visas.

His act of heroism, in defying his own government for many years, was just an obscure footnote in the history of the War until the people whom Sugihara had saved broke their silence and decided to tell his story. Then everyone celebrated his great courage; the media joined in and authors were inspired to write books describing him as a 'Japanese Schindler'.

Meanwhile, the Israeli government was collating the names of all such saviours in order to reward them for their efforts. One of the ways in which the Jewish state tried to

acknowledge their debt to these heroes was to plant trees in their honour. When Sugihara's bravery became known, the Israeli authorities planned, as was the custom, to plant a grove of trees in his memory, cherry trees - Japan's traditional tree.

Suddenly, the unusual decision was taken to revoke the order. They decided that cherry trees were not an adequate symbol of Sugihara's courage. They chose instead to plant a grove of cedar trees because the cedar is a much more vigorous tree and one with sacred connotations, having been used in the construction of the first Temple.

Only when the trees had already been planted did the authorities learn that in Japanese 'sugihara' means…a grove of cedar trees.

In Buddha and in the Virgin Mary

The Vietnamese monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, is one of the most respected teachers of Buddhism in the West.

When he was travelling in Sri Lanka, he met six barefoot children. 'They were not children from a shanty town, but children from the country, and looking at them, I saw that they formed part of the nature which surrounded them.'

He was alone on the beach and they all ran towards him. Since Thich Nhat Hanh did not speak their language, he simply hugged them and they hugged him back.

At one point, however, he suddenly remembered an ancient Buddhist prayer: 'I take refuge in Buddha'. He began singing it, and four

of the children joined in. Thich Nhat Hanh made a sign to the other two children who were not singing. They smiled, put their hands together and said in Pali: 'I take refuge in the Virgin Mary.'

The sound of the prayer was the same. On that beach, on that afternoon, Thich Nhat Nanh says that he found a harmony and serenity he had rarely experienced before.

The priest and his son

For many years, a Brahmin priest had looked after a chapel. When he had to go away, he asked his son to carry out his daily duties until he returned. One of these tasks was to place the offering of food before the Divinity and to see if the food was eaten.

The boy set off cheerily to the temple where his father worked. He placed the food before the Divinity and sat waiting for the image to move.

He remained there all day. And the statue did not move. However, the boy, faithful to his father's instructions, was sure that the Divinity would descend from the altar to receive his offering.

After a long wait, he said pleadingly:

'Lord, come and eat! It's very late and I cannot wait any longer.'

Nothing happened. The boy spoke more loudly:

'Lord, my father told me I must be here when You come down to accept the offering. Why do You not do so? Will You only take the offering from my father's hands? What did I do wrong?'

And he wept long and hard. When he looked up and wiped away his tears, he got a tremendous fright, for there was the Divinity eating the food he had placed there.

The child ran joyfully back home. Imagine his surprise when one of his relatives said to him.

'The service is over. Where is the food?'

'The Lord ate it,' the child replied, taken aback.

Everyone was amazed.

'What are you talking about. What did you just say? We didn't quite hear.'

The child innocently repeated his words:

'The Lord ate all the food I gave Him.'

'That's impossible,' said an uncle. 'Your father only told you to see if the food was eaten. We all know that the offering is merely a symbolic act. You must have stolen the food.'

The child, however, refused to change his story, even when threatened with a beating.

Still suspicious, his relatives went to the temple and found the Divinity sitting, smiling.

'A fisherman threw his net into the sea and got a good catch,' said the Divinity. 'Some fish lay utterly still, making no effort to get out. Others thrashed about desperately, but were unable to escape. Only a few fortunate ones were successful and managed to get away.

Just like those fish, three kinds of men came here to bring me offerings: some did not want to speak to me, believing I would not respond. Others tried, but soon gave up, for fear of disappointment. This small boy, on the other hand, did not give up, and so I, who play with men's patience and perseverance, finally revealed myself.'

The small farm and the cow

A philosopher was strolling through the forest with a disciple, discussing the importance of unexpected encounters. According to the philosopher, everything around us provides us with an opportunity to learn or to teach.

At that moment, they passed the gate of a small farm which, although well situated, appeared to be extremely run down.

'Just look at this place,' said the disciple. 'You're quite right. What I learn from this is that many people live in Paradise, but are not even aware that they do and continue to live in the most miserable conditions.'

'I said learn and teach,' retorted the philosopher. 'It is never enough simply to notice what is going on, you must also find out the

causes, because we can only understand the world when we understand the causes.'

They knocked on the door and were received by the inhabitants: a couple and their three children, all dressed in ragged, dirty clothes.

'You live in the middle of the forest with no shops anywhere around,' said the philosopher to the father of the family. 'How do you survive here?'

The man very calmly replied:

'My friend, we have a cow who gives us several litres of milk every day. Some of this we sell or exchange in the neighbouring town for other food, and with the remainder we make cheese, yoghurt and butter for ourselves. And that is how we survive.'

The philosopher thanked him for this information, looked at the place for a few moments and then left. As they walked away, he said to his disciple:

'Take the cow, lead it to that precipice and push it over.'

'But the cow is the family's only means of support.'

The philosopher said nothing. Having no alternative, the young man did as he was told, and the cow fell to its death.

The scene remained engraved on his memory. Many years later, when he himself was a successful businessman, he resolved to return to that place, to tell the family everything, to ask their forgiveness and to help them financially.

Imagine his surprise when he found the place transformed into a beautiful farm with flowering trees, a car in the garage and children playing in the garden. He was gripped by despair, thinking that the humble family must have been forced to sell the farm in order to survive. He hurried on and was greeted by a friendly servant.

'What happened to the family who used to live here ten years ago?' he asked.

'They still own the place,' came the reply.

Astonished, he ran into the house, and the owner recognized him. He asked after the

philosopher, but the young man was too anxious to find out how the man had managed to improve the farm and to raise his standard of living so dramatically.

'Well, we used to have a cow, but it fell over the precipice and died,' said the man. 'Then, in order to support my family, I had to plant herbs and vegetables. The plants took a while to grow, and so I started cutting down trees to sell the wood. Then, of course, I had to buy saplings to replace the trees. When I was buying the saplings, I thought about my children's clothes, and it occurred to me that I could perhaps try growing my own cotton. I had a difficult first year, but by the time harvest came around, I was already selling vegetables, cotton and aromatic herbs. I had never realised how much potential the farm had. It was a bit of luck really that cow dying!'

(A story circulating on the Internet in 1999, author unknown.)

The old man who spoiled everything

G. I. Gurdjeff was one the twentieth century's most intriguing characters. Although a familiar name in occult circles, his work as a student of human psychology remains unknown.

The following events took place when he was living in Paris, having just set up his famous Institute for Human Development.

The classes were always packed, but amongst the students was a very bad-tempered old man, who was constantly criticising the Institute's teachings. He said that Gurdjeff was a charlatan, that his methods had no scientific basis, and that his reputation as a 'magus' bore no relation to reality. The other students were

bothered by the presence of this old man, but Gurdjeff did not seem to mind.

One day, the old man left the group. Everyone felt relieved, thinking that from then on the classes would be quieter and more productive. To their surprise, Gurdjeff went to the man's house and asked him to return to the Institute.

The old man refused at first and only accepted when he was offered a salary to attend the classes.

The story soon spread. The students were disgusted and wanted to know why a teacher should reward someone who had learned nothing.

'Actually, I'm paying him to continue teaching,' came the reply.

'What?!' said the students. 'Everything he does goes completely against what you are teaching us.'

'Exactly,' said Gurdjeff. 'Without him around, you would find it hard to understand what rage, intolerance, impatience and lack of

compassion really mean. However, with this old man as a living example, showing just how such feelings can turn community life into a hell, you will learn much more quickly. You pay me to learn how to live in harmony, and I hired this man to help me teach you that lesson, only the other way round.'

How to achieve immortality

When he was still a young man, Beethoven decided to compose a few improvisations on music by Pergolesi. He devoted months to this task and finally had the courage to publish it.

A critic wrote a whole-page review in a German newspaper in which he launched a ferocious attack on the music.

Beethoven, however, was quite unshaken by his comments. When his friends pressed him to respond to the critic, he merely said:

'All I need to do is to carry on with my work. If the music I compose is as good as I think it is, then it will survive that journalist. If it has the depth I hope it has, it will survive the newspaper too. Should that ferocious attack on what I do ever be remembered in the future, it

will only serve as an example of the imbecility of critics.'

Beethoven was absolutely right. Over a hundred years later, that same review was mentioned in a radio programme in São Paulo.

The porcelain vase and the rose

Alessandra Marin tells the following story: the Grand Master and the Guardian shared the administration of a Zen monastery. One day, the Guardian died and a replacement had to be found.

The Grand Master gathered together all the disciples in order to decide who would have the honour of working at his side.

'I am going to set you a problem,' said the Grand Master. 'And the first one to solve that problem will be the new Guardian of the temple.'

Once this briefest of speeches was over, he placed a small stool in the middle of the room. On it stood a priceless porcelain vase containing a red rose.

'There is the problem,' said the Grand Master.

The disciples looked in some perplexity at what was there before them: the rare, sophisticated designs on the porcelain vase and the elegance of the flower. What did it represent? What should they do? What did this enigma mean?

After a few moments, one of the disciples got to his feet and looked at the master and at his fellow students. Then he walked resolutely over to the vase and threw it to the ground, shattering it.

'You are the new Guardian,' the Grand Master said to the student.

And as soon as the student had returned to his place, he explained.

'I made myself perfectly clear. I said that there was a problem to be solved. Now it does not matter how beautiful or fascinating a problem might be, it has to be eliminated.

A problem is a problem. It could be a very rare porcelain vase, a delightful love affair that

no longer makes any sense, or a course of action that we should abandon, but which we insist on continuing because it brings us comfort.

There is only one way to deal with a problem: attack it head on. At such moments, one cannot feel pity, nor be diverted by the fascination inherent in any conflict.'

Hunting two foxes

A student of martial arts said to his teacher:

'I would like to be a great aikido fighter,' he said. 'But I think I should also devote myself to judo, so that I am familiar with many different styles of fighting. That is the only way I can become the best.'

His teacher replied: 'If a man goes into a field and starts running after two foxes at the same time, there will come a moment when the foxes will go their separate ways, and the man will be left not knowing which one to pursue. While he is pondering the problem, the foxes will be far away and he will have wasted both his time and his energy.

Anyone who wants to become a master must choose just ONE thing in which to become an expert. All else is mere cant.'

Teacher and disciple confront the river

A disciple had such faith in the powers of the guru Sanjai that he once asked to meet him beside the river.

'Master, everything I have learned from you has changed my life. I was able to save my marriage, sort out the family business and help my neighbours. Everything I ever asked for in your name and in good faith I have received.'

Sanjai looked at his disciple, and his heart swelled with pride.

The disciple walked down to the edge of the river.

'Such is my faith in your teachings and in your divinity that I have only to say your name and I will be able to walk on the waters.'

Before the teacher could say anything, his disciple had entered the river, crying:

'All praise to Sanjai! All praise to Sanjai!'

He took one step.Then another.

And a third step. His body began to levitate and the young man managed to reach the other side of the river without even getting his feet wet.

Sanjai looked in surprise at the disciple, who was standing on the other shore waving at him and smiling.

'Perhaps I am more enlightened than I thought I was. I could have the most famous monastery in the region! I could rise to the same heights as the great saints and gurus!'

Determined to repeat his disciple's success, he too walked down to the shore and, as he stepped into the river, he began to cry:

'All praise to Sanjai! All praise to Sanjai!'

He took one step and a second step, but by the third he was already being swept away by the current. Since he did not know how to

swim, his disciple had to dive into the water to save him from certain death.

When both men reached the shore, exhausted, Sanjai remained silent for a long time. Finally, he said:

'I hope you can draw a wise lesson from what happened today. All that I taught you were the scriptures and the correct way to behave. However, none of that would have been enough if you had not added what was missing: the faith that such teachings could improve your life.

I taught you because my teachers taught me. But while I thought and studied, you put into practice what you had learned. Thank you for helping me to understand that one does not always believe in what one wants others to believe.'